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ABSTRACT

An analysis of 255 books written since 1970 for children in the primary grades reveals that two of every three books do not mention career concepts or provide information on work values. Those books that do refer to work do so in a way that subordinates the concept to the plot and character development, often showing the child that work is done by someone other than children. If the child character is under eight years old and has assigned tasks to perform, he/she is usually responsible for taking care of other family members or animals at home. These tasks take on added significance if the family survival is at stake. Care of larger or wild animals present special challenges and brings self-esteem for the worker and recognition of the worker's competence by others. Books for seven-and eight-year-old children show characters working beyond the family in projects that earn money or that benefit the community. Stories with adult protagonists usually deal with the larger concerns of community and country and present positive role models for the reader. Generally, books that show respect for hard work also criticize laziness, leaving jobs unfinished, and exploiting other people. (A six-page bibliography of children's books with work themes is appended.) (MAI)

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Learning About Work--A Study of Contemporary Fiction for Children

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Learning About Work--A Study of
Contemporary Fiction for Children

Learning about work, its nature and its rewards, is essential in our society. Recently, however, the business community has voiced concern that young Americans are not learning this basic lesson. Educational administrators and teachers are responding to the problem by developing career education programs that focus partly on developing understanding of the nature of work and positive work attitudes in the next generation of workers. Career education is very important in pre-school and in the K-3 grades, since many attitudes become fixed at this time. Yet no one has explored the attitudes towards work and notions about the nature of work modern writers of fiction for young children are presenting to their audiences. My study of 255 storybooks with copyright dates of 1970 and later shows that two out of every three books ignore work entirely, but that the writers who do treat work as a concept, (the word itself is rarely used), display positive attitudes towards it. Work allows fictional characters to help themselves and others, to express themselves creatively, to gain recognition from peers and authority figures, and to serve their communities. Thus a creative teacher can use good stories, the traditional carriers of values in our culture, to implement career education in the early grades.

In fiction, however, information on work and work values, if present at all, will be subordinated to plot and character development. Since these are stories, not tracts, the teacher may need to emphasize ideas about the purposes and rewards of work that are inherent in the story. The teacher should be aware that one writer may stress persistence as a quality needed to achieve a work goal, while another may show the need to give up unrealistic goals. One may show work as necessary for family survival; another shows it as defining manhood. Writers for young children present a wide variety of perspectives on work, and the suggested reading list at the end of this article may help the teacher find a story appropriate to the concept of work he or she wishes the students to explore.

Storybooks of the seventies often show the young child that work is something done by someone else. This is not surprising since child labor is not needed in our culture. Indeed, children are a short-term economic liability to a family, not an asset. So work is done by others, particularly by adult males, the fathers, older brothers and other men of the community. Adult females usually work only if no adult male in the family does so. In these stories, the child character remains ignorant of the nature of the work done and rarely sees the worker on the job. Nor do the stories stress the rewards of work, although a paycheck may be mentioned. In John Steptoe's Train Ride, Charlie tells his friends about his older brother, who works at Chock ful o' Nuts on 42nd Street

in New York City. Charlie and his pals, who are urban children, have no work to do on a hot summer day. Sometimes children see workers briefly, as Marvin sees the man fixing the pipes beneath the street in Marvin's Manhole or as Sally sees the grocery story manager in Messy Sally. If a mother works, as in Everett Anderson's Friend, the writer rarely specifies her profession and puts emphasis on the difficulties her child faces because Mom is not at home or on her tiredness at the end of the day. The personal satisfaction she gets from her profession is not important.

If the child character is under eight his tasks are done at home. His work takes on greatest significance when the work of each member is needed for family survival. Since the work of children is not essential in modern urban or suburban middle class life, the stories usually take place in settings remote in either space or time. The setting is usually rural. Mary, in Mary of Mile 18, has to work hard, as does everyone, to make a success of an Alaskan homestead. Even animals must earn their food. Mary's puppy must earn his keep as a watchdog before her father will allow the dog to stay. However, working together can be fun for a family and for an audience. Sid Fleischman, in McBroom the Rainmaker, presents a tall-tale view of a family farm on which all the children work at planting, cultivating and harvesting vegetables.

Stories for younger children often show child characters taking care of other family members. They rarely label such

activity "work." In fact, the word "work" is hard to find. These stories take for granted the fact that mothers "take care of" children. Children play at the "taking care of" that is the work of parenting and housekeeping. In Charlotte Zolotow's William's Doll, only a sensitive grandmother recognizes the legitimacy of William's need for a doll if he is to rehearse for the tasks of fatherhood. Yet rewards can come to child characters who do such work. Emily, in Emily and the Klunky Baby and the Next Door Dog earns praise from her mother, who calls her "my Big girl helper" after Emily takes care of her brother to free mother to do the taxes. In A Surprise for Mother, both mother and father praise the children who have helped their sick mother. Sometimes a family member actually needs protection. Piglet Garth's brothers and sisters save him from the predatory babysitter Mrs. Wolf in Mary Rayner's Mr. and Mrs. Pig's Evening Out. But for the most part household work is labelled "helping" or "cooking." Neither authors nor characters seem to recognize its importance. The teacher using such stories would need to help students develop the notions of the essential nature and real value of the day to day work of a household.

The authors of current storybooks treat caring for animals as work more often than they do caring for other people. Sometimes taking care of a puppy or kitten helps a child deal with sibling rivalry. In Puppy Love, by Wayne Carley, Leslie learns to care about a new baby when she sees that her puppy and her mother's infant have similar needs and that she

and her mother thus have similar jobs. In Judith Vigna's Couldn't We Have a Turtle Instead, Lizzie thinks she wants a menagerie of pets instead of a baby. Only when her mother points out that all the work of caring for the animals would leave them no time for each other does Lizzie accept the baby. Books about pets often contain this warning tone; if you are not a responsible worker, do not get a pet. This idea is amusingly developed in Sendak and Margolis's Some Swell Pup or: Are You Sure You Want a Dog?

Larger or wild animals present special challenges to workers who care for them. In William Wondriska's The Stop the Indian boy Little Brother must conquer his fear of darkness and of being alone in the desert and must show his skill as an outdoorsman in order to save a hurt colt. Similarly, caring for a wild rabbit requires the protagonist of Liesel Skorpen's Michael to conquer his fear of thunderstorms. Rudy de Soto, in Hawk, I'm Your Brother, learns painfully that human care is frequently inadequate for and unsuited to wild animals. In stories about large or wild animals the reader is shown that work involves overcoming technical difficulties by combining intelligence and available materials. They also show the reader the need for concentration on the task and dedication to it in spite of one's own fears or sense of inadequacy. The rewards of such work are not only healthy animals but also immense self esteem for the worker and recognition of the worker's competence by others.

Many stories about anthropomorphized animals stress helping others who are not family members. These works emphasize the need for teamwork and cooperation to get jobs done. In Elephant in the Well only the combined efforts of all, even the weak and despised mouse, can get a baby elephant out of a well. Sometimes two characters combine to benefit from each other's talents, as in Two Good Friends when Duck cleans house for Bear and Bear bakes muffins for Duck. Sometimes whole groups of animals cooperate for their mutual benefit, as do the koala bears and the kangaroos in Bear Circus. In many folktales and in Bill Peet's recent Cyrus the Unsinkable Sea Serpent animals help humans. In stories about anthropomorphized animals writers give more emphasis to the approaches to work--planning, organization, motivation, trial and error, persistent effort--than they do in purely domestic stories. The tasks are usually more complex and less ordinary than cooking and cleaning. The rewards are more diverse too, but in every case successful work results in raised self esteem for the worker.

As the child's world expands, so does the world where he can engage in and appreciate work. Thus books for seven-and-eight-year-olds in my sample showed characters working in the world beyond the family. They involved themselves in projects in order to express themselves, to earn recognition and/or money or to benefit the community. Many of these books contained adult protagonists who were obviously role models whose character traits were to be admired and emulated by the reader.

Characters in current books for young children make things or put on dramatic performances to satisfy themselves or to earn recognition from others. In the 1970s there are few of the traditional stories in which a single protagonist, usually a lone boy, works around the neighborhood to earn a bike or a wagon. One good one is Shawn's Red Bike. Instead, the goal is to win a contest. In Ellen Raskin's Franklin Stein, lonely Franklin makes a pet monster, which wins "most original pet." Because of his work for the contest, he also wins as a friend a girl who also likes to make things. Making something can be a matter of necessity, as in Tomie de Paola's Charlie Needs a Cloak. In this book and in Peter Cohen's extraordinary Authorized Autumn Charts of the Upper Red River Canoe Country, the authors stress methods, systems and persistence as ways of overcoming obstacles to success. Characters aim at gaining recognition from an audience and, sometimes, at earning money when they stage dramatic performances. The writers emphasize planning, organization, cooperation and the need for rehearsal. When Christina Katerina wants to dance in her own recital, in Christina Katerina and the First Annual Grand Ballet, she has to convince her parents to let her use the newly redecorated basement, draft her friends as dancers and stagehands, make costumes, conduct rehearsals and, finally, send the curtain-boy on an errand to keep him from ruining the show. These stories show that work does not always go smoothly and they introduce the reader to concepts like making mistakes, acknowledging failures,

working around people who cannot do their jobs and abandoning projects too difficult for the available talent.

Stories with adult protagonists usually deal with larger concerns of community and country. Current fiction emphasizes working for a better environment and for good government. Henry Bear's Park presents a young protagonist who takes over care of a park and turns it into a community showplace. Elisa Trimby's Mr. Plum's Paradise is similar. In this tale the effort of one gardener to create a spot of beauty in a decayed neighborhood is the catalyst for a community garden in which the whole neighborhood participates. In other stories, like The Mushroom Center Disaster, the initial effort of one character saves a community from ecological or economic disaster. The work of a single governmental leader can generate cooperative community effort, as it does in Arnold Lobel's On the Day Peter Stuyvesant Sailed into Town. But individuals may have to shoulder the responsibility of telling the leaders of government the truth. Both The Seventh Mandarin and The King's Fountain stress the point that people suffer if the ruler is unaware of their problems and in each case a single man summons the courage to inform the king of the harm his actions can cause his people.

Contemporary fiction for young people not only shows what work is and who may benefit from it, it also presents many attitudes towards work that the teacher can use to reinforce positive behaviors and to question negative ones. Generally, those writers who deal with work in their stories

show respect for hard work and for doing a job well, while they criticize laziness, leaving jobs unfinished and exploiting others. John Steptoe's Birthday shows black men and women working hard for their people, especially their children, as they establish a new community, where, hopefully, there will be no prejudice. Stories like Girls Can Be Anything, in which children fantasize about what they might become as adults, encourage ambition in readers. Mr. and Mrs. Abbott, in Adrienne Adams's The Easter Egg Artist urge their son to experiment with many forms of artistic endeavor to find his own style of working. In some stories work defines adulthood. In Liam's Catch, ten year old Liam earns praise from the local Irish squire for being "an efficient man" on the fish-spotting tower. On the other hand, laziness can bring disaster, as it nearly does in Wild Robin and Bubba and Babba, both retold folk tales. Exploiting others leads to humbling and learning experiences for the exploiters in The Four Donkeys and Dazzle. In Frank Asch's Good Lemonade Hank learns that no amount of advertising is a substitute for a good product. Stories for young children even deal with the need for retraining and with mid-career shifts. Farmer Hoo and the Baboons shows the unhappiness of a man who is obsessed with work to the exclusion of fun and then has him learn about play.

Good work by many people is essential to our society. Teachers of the early grades who want their students to understand good work and the rewards it can bring can find

current fiction to help them. The pages that follow contain a classified list of some of the books available. In these stories readers and listeners will find characters who learn about the value of work at home and in the world outside. They will find workers who help themselves and others, who work for money or for the fun of it or both. They will find people who care for the very young, for the very old, for the sick. They will meet a boy who makes monsters, witches who bake prize-winning cakes, and a girl who follows a successful dance recital with the declaration that she's going out for baseball next. Some writers for young children still present the theme that good work is a source of profound satisfaction to human beings. And they tell good stories, too.

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